

"He was a-taking such monstrous high jumps, drawing back so deep under Rowdy's saddle, me and Clint swore later he was bucking backwards."

Such material for stories in the shortgrass country shows a precipitous drop from the days when the land carried lots of livestock and worked lots of cowboys – wild men and wild cattle.

Air conditioning and window screens ended sitting in the yard front of the bunkhouse under a summer moon, listening to "Cowboy" or "Clint" re-ride the bay horse the boss called "Shady Boy" and the crew called "Four-bits."

Barbers becoming hair stylists dried up an enormous source of stories. The transition from the oldtime shops with a public bath for the hands to bathe and change into new clothes on payday makes the present-day shops as interesting as having a prescription filled for mosquito bites in a chain store.

And now come cell phones, a blasphemy to civil human contact. In the busy cities, citizens' lips form goldfish puckers from blabbing so much into conical mouthpieces. Wrestlers' ears and chin tucks afflict the worst cases; doctors treat cell elbows as frequently as tennis elbows.

Here on the Divide, the summer outbreak of jumbo grasshoppers added a bit of excitement. The big thunderstorms in late May and June changed the hoppers' body scales and appendage muscles from a light orange sheen to a darker mossy green texture common to amphibians. Seated at this desk, the sound of the grasshoppers' bodies colliding with the door screen made a soggy plop – virtually a splash.

Along each edge of the doorstep, a scattering of half-eaten carcasses lies strewn about in bits. An old lizard sleeps in the hedge mother planted. The first time he began spitting grasshoppers close by, it brought back the sound marine iguanas make on the Galapagos Islands expectorating salt water, except this mountain boomer of a desert lizard's appetite centered on dried bugs. Iguanas eat everything washing on shore, from shrimp shells to seaweed. Mountain boomers would eat a rusty steeple before they'd taste a marsh-flavored grasshopper.

In June, another story broke. It featured the bullsnake that dens in the garage plunging into the ground squirrel's hole off the cement just as a cowboy and his grandson parked in front.

Summoned, I joined in time to watch the snake sliding down into the hole after the ground squirrel.

We monitored his progress by watching his body disappear, estimating the depth in slithers. (One slither equals three inches.) At eight slithers, stomach contractions indicated biting and swallowing action at the bottom hole.

However, the snake developed claustrophobia bumping his head while trying to swallow the squirrel in such tight quarters. Coming out of the hole, his reverse speed exceeded his body's time to uncoil on the curves, resulting in a reptilia lumbar whiplash serious enough to need space to unwind.

But once above ground, sensing us, he bolted for the back of the garage in a sidewinder escape that'd make a prairie racer think he was dragging a chain.

On the same mission to gather material, a better lead came from down south of the ranch as odds ran high that few witnesses remained to dispute the story. A *compadre* named Jim passed the story on condition of anonymity even to using his first name. So "Jim" has to be the "I" telling the story:

"When I was a kid, on the Fourth of July, a carnival came to town. Among other wonders, one act costing a dime a ticket featured a man swallowing a live snake."

Pausing: "Ever know ol' Johnny, the cow trader and commission man? Whether you did or you didn't, we kids never forgot him from that Fourth on, 'cause he climbed up on the stage, pulled a cocked six-shooter, and forced the carnie hand to swallow the snake. To really swallow the snake — not fake it."

Pausing again: "The sheriff arrested Johnny. Didn't want to. Think they might have kept Johnny in jail until time to see whether he'd vote the right ticket absentee in the sheriff's race, or maybe he needed to soak in jail until election day."

Be warned, before writing a story like Jim's you'd better check who inherited Johnny's six-shooter, plus any record of violence or incidents of revenge in the family history. Like, say, whipping a newspaper scribe over the head with a six-shooter barrel, or maybe offering a member of the Fifth Estate the same opportunity Johnny gave the carnival guy.

The story took hard work being careful to keep the facts straight and the source anonymous. I called my old pal Dan ranching down there to confirm Jim's story.

Hadn't even made good contact before Dan started hollering, "By gawd-a-mighty, don't even attach my initials to the story."

Dan forgot that his ol' daddy never passed up a chance to spin one, or that as sparse as material is today, folks need to share.